



**Power, Gerald & Pilný, Ondřej. *Ireland and the Czech Lands: Contacts and Comparisons in History and Culture*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2014. 235 pp.**

*Ireland and the Czech Lands: Contacts and Comparisons in History and Culture* is a timely publication in the field of Irish and Czech comparative studies. It is the result of an ambitious project as it is comprised of ten chapters, or essays, by renowned scholars on a variety of subjects concerning the two territories, from early modern times to the present. The editors, Gerald Power and Ondřej Pilný, describe this study as “a series of maps of significant historical episodes and areas of cultural production, ranging from initial attempts at charting new perspectives and areas of study, to panoramic surveys of more established research fields.” (1) As this publication aims to strike a new note on Irish and Czech historical and cultural relations, the editors have decided not to reprint existing material, which is properly referred to in the explanatory footnotes, but to give voice to fresh perspectives.

Since relations between Ireland and the Czech Lands are not, at a first glance, promptly perceptible, the editors offer an insightful panorama that introduces the main topics addressed in the book and contextualizes the individual contributions, which are in an indistinct dialogue with one another. After Power and Pilný’s expounding on the different “nomenclatures” that give name to the lands in question, they trace connections between the Irish and the Czech dating from the Irish emigration in the seventeenth century, after the Cromwellian conquest of Ireland, to fight as mercenary soldiers in the Thirty Years War. Yet, for several decades, transactions between the two regions remained limited and began to improve only in the twentieth century: a number of Czech specialists gained fame in Ireland after setting up sugar factories in the 1920s and the glass making industry, especially the Waterford Crystal factory, in the 1930s. Furthermore, after the Communist Party came to power in Czechoslovakia in 1948, Ireland became the destination of political immigrants from Czechoslovakia. Nevertheless, the Irish press depicted Czechoslovakia with suspicion as the lack of up to date information was combined with the view of it being atheist and governed by communists.

The authors also pinpoint what they call congruencies and deviations in both countries’ histories. One resemblance, among others, is their apparently shared “colonial” experience: the debate of whether or not Ireland was a colony could be applied to the Czech Lands and its relation to the Habsburg monarchy. The diversions between the two regions begin after the Czech Lands and Ireland gained independence, respectively in 1918 and 1921: the Irish Free State entered phases of consolidation, while the Czechoslovak autonomy was undermined by the Nazis in 1938, and by Moscow-directed communists a decade later. However, due to different motivations, issues related to national borders

and minorities remained, and reached its peak in the Czech disaster of 1938 and in the in Northern Irish “Troubles” that lasted until the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

The book’s introduction provides an extensive summary of literary and cultural links between the two territories, also referred to in the individual essays. The authors claim the earliest significant period of Czech interest Ireland to be the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and “it was the popularity of James Macpherson’s Ossianic forgeries of the 1760s, throughout Europe, that initiated an interest in “Celtic” poetry in the Czech Lands” (5). The volume also underscores the role played by translators in the dissemination of Irish prose, poetry and drama in the Czech Lands. Thus, while the essays have as their main core Irish and Czech relations, they can be grouped around three main topics: history, culture and literature.

Historical relations are tackled in contributions by early historians Gerald Power and Jiří Brňovják’s. Gerald Power compares the sixteenth-century nobilities of Ireland and Bohemia in terms of their responses to the Tudor and Habsburg regimes to the increase of monarchical authority at the expense of noble power in each their kingdoms. By the 1620s the conflicting situation Ireland and Bohemia were dealing with became more similar in the aftermath of the battle of White Mountain: disastrous uprisings led to major political reconstruction by the monarchy. This new scenario favoured native nobles prepared to cooperate as well as of loyalists and arrivistes: the English and Scottish settlers and German and Italian aristocrats who took up titles, lands and offices in post-White Mountain Bohemia. Jiří Brňovják’s essay on Irish aristocratic migration and settlement in the Czech Lands demonstrates that there is still much work to be done. Brňovják’s work is still one of recovery, whose primary outcome is, according to Power and Pilný, depicted on the cover of this volume: most inhabitants of Fryštát, where a statue of St Patrick was erected by the Taafe family, take it for St. Nicholas, the saint who brings gifts to children in December. All the same, the editors point to further research to be done on some of the most influential Irish families associated with the Czech Lands presented by Brňovjak, in addition to work on Bohemian and Irish connection.

Cultural connections are established in articles by Hedvika Kuchařová and Jan Pařez, by Martina Power, by Lili Zách and by Daniel Samek. The essay by Kuchařová and Pařez investigates the way in which the seventeenth-century intensive contact between Ireland and Bohemia was established, as religious intolerance in Ireland encouraged Irish Catholics to leave for the continent; Prague was their main destination. Her conclusion is threefold: there is a small group of Friars about whom little is known; some of the Irish Franciscans that stayed in Prague were mostly the old, sick and disabled; and most of the Friars who left Bohemia returned to Ireland. Martina Power’s essay presents an innovative examination of the way in which the Germans viewed Bohemia and the British perceived Ireland from 1750 to 1850. Power focuses on pre-modern travel literature and the awareness of territory, including borders, to show that both Germans and British viewed Czech and Irish peoples in similar ways. Travel writers of the eighteenth century would focus on the “backwardness” of the natives, while those of the nineteenth century

examined the positions of Bohemia within Germany and Britain. Power's conclusion is that although territorial conflicts pertaining to these regions – either separation in the Irish case or the maintenance of exclusion in Bohemia – became evident in the second half of the nineteenth century, they were already apparent to German and British travel writers by the 1840s. The following two contributions deal with Czech-Irish connections in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lilia Zách's essay deals with the way in which Irish intellectuals, mostly from a Catholic, nationalist, middle class background, have expressed in important Irish-Catholic journals their perception of Czechoslovakia between 1918, when its independence was proclaimed, and 1938, the year of the Sudetenland crisis. Zách's conclusions are, according to Power and Pilný that the texts that were analysed reflect Catholic orientations and a Czechoslovakia viewed "through an Irish lens", which resulted in "intriguing conceptions of Czech interwar problems, including Czechoslovak Ulster" (21). Daniel Samek's essay delves into the way elements of Czech society could resonate in Ireland while investigating how the rigid, yet aesthetic, Czech gymnastics method, known as Sokol, was introduced in the Irish army and schools in the 1930s. Samek also alludes to the parallel drawn by Frank Aiken between the Sokol movement in Bohemia and the Gaelic Athletic Association in Ireland: Aiken insisted that in its native home the Sokol movement helped to keep the people together in the fight against oppression, just as the GAA did in Ireland.

Literary relations are addressed in the works of Bohuslav Mánek, Justin Quinn and Ondřej Pilný. Bohuslav Mánek discusses the Czech reception of Irish poetry and prose in Czech literary production in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He comments on the influence of Ossianic verse on the Czech national revival and highlights the importance of the translation of the work of Oliver Goldsmith and Thomas Moore in Czech poetry. Furthermore, Mánek provides a historical panorama of the translations of James Joyce's main works, such as *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Anna Livia Plurabelle*, and *Ulysses* – with careful attention to the preservation of its rhythm and musicality. These translations were generally well received, even under the censorship of the totalitarian regime. In his conclusion, Mánek hopes for the continuation of these creative contacts, declaring that "in Czech literature original and translated writing has been [...] very tightly connected to social and political developments, and the reception of Irish writing has contributed to the scope and quality of writing in Czech, and has generally enriched Czech culture." (175) Justin Quinn's essay inquires into the exchange between two European writers from "minor European cultures [...] and with strong bonds to minority languages" (178): the Czech Miroslav Holub and the Irish Seamus Heaney. Heaney's engagement with the Czech writer was part of a wider exploration of Eastern European Poetry he conducted while resident in California, Berkley. Quinn argues that this engagement is insightful in a critical perspective because Holub was influenced by American poets belonging to the Beat generation, chiefly Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg, which were not of interest to Heaney. However, the outcome is extraordinary for, in fact, "Holub was channelling Heaney's Californian neighbours,

twelve miles distant from Berkeley across the Lincoln highway in North Beach, San Francisco, where the City Lights bookshop was and still is located” (196-197), though Heaney was not aware of it. Finally, Ondřej Pilný’s essay provides an assessment of the impact that modern Irish drama had in the Czech Lands from its outset to its present day. He discusses the reception of Oscar Wilde, which pleased Czech decadents, and Bernard Shaw, whose popularity continues after the Second World War. Apart from John Millington Synge and Sean O’Casey, no other playwright associated with the early Abbey Theatre received significant attention on the Czech stages. The translation and production of J.M. Synge’s *The Shadow of the Glen* led to an article regarding The Irish National Theatre, by Karel Mušek, and the work of O’Casey reached the Czech stages along with televised adaptations; curiously, however, the *Plough and the Stars*, a piece that conveys a clear socialist message, remains untranslated. A discussion of the 1963 production of Brendan Behan’s *The Hostage* is followed by an assessment of the impact of Samuel Beckett’s work on Czech intellectuals and theatre production after 1989: *Waiting for Godot* was his most frequently produced play, though “in a manner which Beckett would have referred to scornfully, as ‘adaptation’.” (217). According to Power and Pilný, “the post 1989 period is charted as an extensive map of productions of numerous more recent authors, from Brian Friel to Martin McDonagh, the latter of whom has ranked among the most successful Anglophone playwrights on the Czech stage ever” (23). Pilný ends with an evaluation of Irish Drama by Milan Lukeš, who delves into formal features of Irish plays and associates the popularity of Irish Drama in the Czech Lands to the Irish playwrights’ engagement in “subverting ideologies of collective identity (...)” (221).

Due to its multidisciplinary character and the accessibility of its essays, this volume is aimed at a somewhat broad readership, from scholars pertaining to the fields of comparative and cultural, historical and literary studies. Due to its innovative quality, this edition will certainly pave the way for further research into Irish-Czech contacts and comparisons, as well, in the editors’ words, “contribute to a broader reassessment of national histories, cultures and identities during a time of unprecedented interaction and co-operation among European states” (23).

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